

29 Years With No Visible Means of Support

Jim Sutherland

November 7, 2005 marked 29 years of living without “visible” means of support—life without a guaranteed salary.

After 5 years of being a salaried missionary with the Reformed Church in America (1972-1976), my wife Judi and I had a house full of packed boxes, with no place to go. With little time to spare, Cedine Bible Institute became the destination in east Tennessee, and with the generosity of a kind couple, we arrived on November 7, 1976, with \$35.00 in promised monthly support. Not long after arriving, I suggested to Judi that we postpone having more children than Naomi and Tim—but Judi developed morning sickness a few days later. Through the kindness to Cedine of Michigan vegetable growers, we had plenty of potatoes, squash, and apples.

Early into this second phase of missionary work, not having had spent 1-2 years raising support, the responsibility of caring adequately for my family was a lens of life. I read the dangerous and challenging *George Müller of Bristol: and his witness to a prayer-hearing God*, by Arthur T. Pierson. George M. vowed that he would reveal his needs to God alone, even if directly asked. How shall the work of the Kingdom be funded? What Christian missionary would not answer, “By God”? But how does one withdraw funds with the Exchequer of the Universe? George M. prayed daily for what was specifically needed --for years if necessary. Lacking the German resolve, discipline, and even taste for this methodology, still his example could not be dismissed. His first objective was not the care of over 2,000 orphans in Bristol, England. That was the laboratory. The experiment was to demonstrate to the world that God provides simply and solely in response to believing prayer. He succeeded, even providing for other ministries such as Hudson Taylor’s in China.

I heard a famous US Christian accuse George Muller of providing us, of all ridiculous things, the example of history’s first “prayer letter,” to solicit support. He was wrong on both counts. Prayer letters have existed at least since the missionary Boniface (Winfrith), by which from Germany he kept in touch with English friends and recruited in the early eighth century¹. Second, George did give an annual report to demonstrate God’s provision the previous year, together with a detailed report of his stewardship. But that these reports were not intended to raise funds is proved by George delaying publication if the books showed deep financial needs, precisely so that the report would not be mistaken for a financial appeal!

A spectrum of conviction exists as how exactly to open the provident hand of God for one’s ministry. George M. and mission organizations such as WEC and OMF are at one extreme. St. Francis of Assisi, who took nothing extra with him on his journeys, advocated doing manual work or begging if necessary². Some

sell various materials, but don't solicit, such as Bill Gothard. "Tentmakers" earn their livelihood while ministering from it. The majority of mission organizations frankly solicit prayer and financial support. Some advocate "friend raising" as the main strategy for fund raising. Others obviously learn from marketing practices, applying them to solicitations via mail and phone, benefit banquets, etc. Some ministries incur no debt--others float large debt. Who has more faith? Each must use the methods for which there is faith (Rom. 14:23). I'm seriously unsure who has more faith—those who simply pray, or those using marketing methods. Judi and I don't have the faith to ask people—perhaps because we are too ashamed or proud—so we poorly utilize the methods best exemplified by George M. We did solicit support several times early in the ministry from churches or pastors who knew us.

The history of the Church displays another spectrum--that of liberty to enjoy the gifts of creation. The monastic order of Cistercians lived in strict poverty, having very simple food and clothes, eschewing any regular income. In our day, Frederick Price claimed to faithfully model Jesus by driving a Rolls Royce³. George M., like St. Francis, took a vow of perpetual poverty. My wife and I try not to love the world or the things in it, but we also enjoy some of God's good and perfect gifts given for enjoyment⁴. I don't oppose on theological grounds having a steak on occasion. We have not taken vows of poverty, but desire to be careful stewards. So within the parameters of the faith God has given, or at least to which we have attained, what provision has God made for us over 25 years?

Family

We have never been hungry as a family. Once we had \$5 in the bank and green beans in the cupboard, but food bags soon appeared. Once our pastor Dale Linebaugh took me to a junkyard where he purchased some used tires for our car.

We have been able to live debt-free for probably 97% of the last 25 years. We owed \$800 on our house when we moved in⁵. The house is valued at over \$200,000 by our insurance company, and we began with about \$17,000 in pension monies. The Lord provided. We have been given at least 7 cars—one with leather seats and two-speed vanity mirror, another with 42,000 miles and a year of free repairs, as well as 4 Olds Cutlasses—3 of them from my mother. (What is it about Cutlasses?)

Naomi got a yellow dress and a Rubic's cube, special delivery from the Lord. A wood stove was paid off in time for Susanna's first December birthday with a gift exactly enough to take it out of layaway. We've received countless bags of food and clothing, and special "personal" gifts, including dinners and days in a chalet hideaway.

Education

All four kids were able to attend a private Christian high school until graduation,

while we all “janitored.” Our four have made it to college and to date all four have their bachelor’s degree without debt. Two children have master’s degrees and a third a second BS. My Ph.D. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was paid for by graduation day. The same program three years after graduation cost \$30,000 just for tuition and fees, excluding books, food, a room or transportation. I spent over 9 months in residency. Still don’t know how it was done, except that God provided through many friends and some jobs. God gave the faith to pursue the program, despite children in college, by providing a car, a room at Trinity and over \$1,200 in one day.

Ministry

God has provided 12 trips to East Africa, 2 to India and one to Dominica. He has enabled us to have equipment to show the Jesus Film outdoors, and now equipment to show PowerPoint presentations inside churches. He has provided a ministry and excellent Boards of Directors. The RMNI office in our home has fast Internet connection and excellent equipment. Ralph Winter taught me “wartime economics.” We spend what we can on the tools of our warfare, even if we may under-spend in other areas.

How does God provide?

One person’s “faith” is another’s “works.” A fellow student felt that my faith was less because I worked to supplement gift income, while that student solicited help by revealing needs, but would not work. Faith is relative. God has provided, we believe, through friends, through those who I doubt even liked us, through churches, through part-time jobs (gardener, janitor, teacher, school bus driver, library assistant, driving instructor, executive directorship), through family members and anonymous folks. Since Paul was a tentmaker, I have felt in good company when that has been necessary, particularly since lack of provision for my family makes me worse than a pagan⁶.

Material things do not necessarily indicate God’s blessing, as the Mormons and Scientology illustrate. We, however, are convinced that God has provided all the above, and far more. Not with the faith of a George M., we assure you, but more ordinary faith that prays more when the payroll check is small and less when the check is full. The main point is that after 29 years of doing it this way, we’re here, wanting you to know that God has magnificently sustained us, in tangible, mundane or super-mundane ways. All this fortunately not because of personal righteousness, or because we use George M.’s methods and verses, but because of God’s grace. I can’t match George’s faithfulness in prayer. When I rightly pray for help, I plead God’s own character, not the need and not who I am—just God’s character—Jehovah Jirah—“God will provide” (Gen. 22:14). This is not necessarily a prescription for others. God uses “means.” Thanks to you who have been God’s instruments of provision—the Exchequer’s open hand⁷.

¹Kenneth S. LaTourette, *A history of Christianity*, p. 349.

²LaTourette, p. 433. See Luke 22:36 where Jesus told the disciples to carry extras after He departed.

³Walter Martin, *The kingdom of the cults*, 1997, p. 510.

⁴James 1:17; 1 Timothy 6:17

⁵The story of this home is found at http://www.rmni.org/reports/2001/Report_3-2001.pdf

⁶1 Timothy 5:8

⁷“Grace as a principle of New Testament support” is at <http://www.rmni.org/financial/NTMissionarySupport.asp>